

DEVELOPING THE PSYCHE OF THE GOALKEEPER

BY PAUL BLODGETT

To paraphrase John Muir: Most people live on the earth; I choose to live in it. This phrase succinctly expresses the state of the psyche of the successful goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is not a superficial position - the athlete must be totally absorbed; mind, body and spirit. As a coach of the position the approach to training should include not only playing the position (with the full compliment of technical and tactical development) but, more importantly, about *being* the position - the focus, the thick skin, the confidence...the Zen.

A keeper's ability to focus is essential. While the keeper is not always physically in the game, mentally they must always be there. The goalkeeper must have the ability to maintain concentration and focus even when the game is over one hundred yards away, because one thing is certain, the game will turn and come back, and suddenly there is a rush of energy sweeping their way. A large number of people will be converging on the keeper, some with the intent to score, others looking to regain possession of the ball. Behind all of this is the keeper. Keepers must now upgrade their focus, track the movement of a mass of players, read what is happening, organize, communicate and lead their group, all the while maintaining a focus on the movement of the ball. The ball is being manipulated around the field, but in the back of the keeper's mind it is understood that the ball is coming his/her way, and that he/she will have to zone in on it, in order to regain its possession. The coach's job, then, is to hammer home directly and often the ability to handle all of this stimuli.

When coaching "focus", demand the players' attention when you are talking to them. Always put their backs to the sun, keep them in a tight group within your forward field of vision, and ask them to look at you in the eyes. The eyes are the gateway to individual's spirit and when you can exchange looks into each other, the connection is made and growth and learning can result. Reinforce the mentality for keepers to exist in the moment, and when the moment is gone, let it go and re-focus. When training keepers I usually have them focus on two or three actions in a row. I always direct them to go on to the next situation, so that they begin to train their

minds to not dwell on what just occurred (good or bad). If you apply this in training, then the keepers will develop the ability to dwell in the moment and go on to the next one without belaboring the situation.

As you coach this "multi-task focus" explain that the keeper's job is a paradox in itself and one that demands a thick skin. On one hand the ball is the keeper's enemy and on the other hand it is his/her ally. A goalkeeper must train with another on the same team with the thought of helping them to be the best they can be, and at the same time compete for the sole possession of the starting job. The position is one of a high-image; keepers dress differently; they get to use their hands; they are highly scrutinized; when they make a mistake, everyone notices it; when they do something great, everyone notices it; but the humdrum of their normal activities can go almost unnoticed. They have to know how to give of themselves and how not to give up. Soccer players who choose to become keepers do so because they love to compete against themselves, as much as they love to compete against others. They need to learn and understand that the position is about the game and the people around them and not themselves - just like any position of leadership. Self-satisfaction comes from giving: working hard to improve their technique; working hard to learn the game; working hard to read various situations; working hard to lead and to organize; working hard to focus; working hard to be confident; working hard to be aware; working hard to turn around and pick the ball out of the net without their psyche breaking down.

It takes the development of "thick skin" for a goalkeeper to handle this type of pressure. Begin developing this "thick skin" immediately. Discuss your approach to coaching with the keepers and be sure that they understand that your criticism is positive and constructive - it is business, not personal. When you correct a player or a person, whether in front of a group or individually, always let them know that you are being constructive, that you want them to learn because you will do everything that you can to help them be the best that they can be. Be honest and forthright. Be a teacher, not a manipulator. Coaches must go beyond themselves in order to help goalkeepers to get beyond themselves as well. Give the players the tools to overcome your own coaching mistakes and this will help them when they are out there feeling alone, under pressure and everything seems to be breaking down in front of them.

As coaches we often walk a thin line between a kick in the butt or a pat on the back. Too much of either one at the wrong time could result in a loss

of player confidence. Oftentimes, young keepers are exposed to the position because of their lack of field skills. We all know of the different rates of physical development of kids and too many times a lesser skilled child will be directed to play in the goal, because it might be the area of lesser activity due to the strength of other players on the field. This can be related to the weakest player in a kids' baseball or softball game, where he/she is placed in right field because that is the area of least activity. The player becomes bored because balls are rarely hit there and you begin to see them throwing their mitt up in the air and catching it or picking the dandelions. All of a sudden the bases get loaded and up comes a batter who hits that high fly ball to the unprepared fielder - grand slam, the team loses, and the fielder takes the blame. My question becomes: Can you expect a young mind to respond to a situation if that person has not been exposed to it in training? Do you kick their butt or pat them on the back? Prepare the players properly and completely and this will give them confidence.

I started a camp in Eastern Pennsylvania and I received a call from a perspective goalkeeper's parent who relayed to me an all too familiar situation. Her son, a twelve year old, was a very good recreational goalkeeper. He was strong and had decent, though not fully trained skills, and was a good enough young athlete that his ability did him well at the position. The parents wanted to move the boy into a more competitive environment and got him onto a traveling team and the boy was very excited. During one of his early games two goals were scored on him in the first half and at half time the coach proceeded to yell, blame and belittle the keeper in front of the team. Understandably the boy's psyche folded and he lost all confidence in himself to the point of never wanting to play the game again. I used the camp to re-create a positive attitude for him. All it took was paying proper attention to him, reinforcing his attributes and letting him know that any comments were constructive and that I just wanted him to be the best he could be, whatever level that turned out to be. The boy improved because, as he explained to his parents, that even when he was being corrected, he was not being yelled at.

If a player wants to play the position, do not lose them. If a player decides not to play the position anymore, let it be on their own accord, not because they were driven from it. Everyone is going to reach their own potential as a keeper and as a person in general. A coach should help a keeper to reach his/her potential and to grow in a positive manner and this will result in a carry-over into life experiences. It is very important to build

a player's confidence, because confidence is the foundation of leadership - a cornerstone of the position.

Soccer is the most popular game in the world with goalkeeping being the most involved position in the game. Therefore a keeper is the best of the best. Make sure that your keepers feel that way and they will be able to handle a seeming failure or a mistake, as well as properly handling the feeling of success. Developing the psyche of the position and mastering it goes well beyond the game. A strong mental and spiritual foundation and a finely tuned body, coupled with the ability to focus on command, the ability to develop a thick skin and the ability to display confidence and leadership will give your keepers the tools to be able to handle the demands of the position. When this is achieved then the result is learning at the highest level and also when individual performances can peak.